

Leading Resistance in Organizational Change

Understanding and Working with Resistance in Change Processes

White Paper

Author
Viktor Jensen

2026

Introduction

Organizational change is often described in terms of strategies, processes, and technologies. However, many change initiatives struggle not because of the technical aspects of the change, but because of how people react to it.

Resistance to change is often viewed as a problem that must be eliminated. Yet resistance can also provide valuable information about how individuals and groups perceive the change process.

This short paper introduces a different perspective on organizational change. Instead of focusing only on how to implement change, we explore how resistance arises and how leaders can better understand and work with resistance in organizations.

1. Understanding Organizational Change

Organizations exist in environments that constantly evolve. Markets change, technologies develop, regulations are introduced, and new expectations arise from customers and employees. As a result, change is not an occasional event but a continuous condition.

One way to understand change in organizations is through the distinction between **first-order and second-order change**.

First-order change refers to adjustments within an existing system. The structure of the organization remains largely the same, while certain elements are modified. Examples include new regulations, new procedures, or the introduction of new tools.

Second-order change, on the other hand, involves changes to the system itself. The underlying structures, assumptions, or ways of working are transformed. Examples include the transition to new organizational models, process-based management, or major digital transformations.

In practice, most organizational changes involve both structural and behavioral elements. Ultimately, organizational change largely involves **changes in human behavior**—how people think, work, collaborate, and make decisions.

2. Resistance to Change

Resistance to change is a common phenomenon in organizations. It can occur at several levels:

- Individual level
- Group level
- Organizational level

Individuals may experience uncertainty, fear, or loss of control. Groups may defend existing norms and practices. Organizations themselves often contain structures and routines that reinforce stability.

However, resistance should not automatically be seen as negative. Resistance can serve several useful functions in a change process.

Resistance can:

- stimulate engagement and discussion
- provide valuable information about risks and concerns
- mobilize energy and involvement
- help identify weaknesses in proposed changes

Understanding resistance therefore becomes an important part of effective leadership during change processes.

3. Phases of Change (Scott & Jaffe)

Research on organizational change suggests that people often go through different phases when experiencing change. One model describes four phases in change processes:

- Reaction phase
- Resistance phase
- Engagement phase
- Transition (or adjustment) phase

These phases illustrate that reactions to change evolve over time. Initial reactions may include surprise or skepticism, followed by resistance or uncertainty. Gradually, individuals and groups may begin to engage with the change and eventually adapt to new ways of working.

An important observation is that different groups in an organization may be in **different phases at the same time**. Top management may already focus on implementation while employees are still processing the implications of the change.

This difference in perspectives can create misunderstandings and tensions during change initiatives.

4. Factors Influencing Resistance

Several factors can influence the level of resistance experienced during a change process. Common factors include:

- Fear of the unknown
- Loss of control
- Loss of competence or status
- Need for security and stability
- Poor timing of the change
- Lack of support from management
- Belief that the change will not improve the situation
- Lack of trust in leaders

Recognizing these factors can help leaders better understand the reactions that emerge during change processes.

5. Success Factors in Change Processes

Leading change requires more than planning and project structures. Leadership behavior plays an important role in how people experience and respond to change.

Important factors include:

- **Self-awareness** – the ability to see situations realistically and respond constructively
- **Credibility** – leaders must practice what they preach
- **Courage and willingness** to address uncertainty and resistance
- **Focus on people** – individuals need clarity, competence, and support

Successful change processes also require clear visions, competence development, and effective communication.

Organizations may benefit from developing a **change mindset**, enabling them to consciously adapt to continuously evolving conditions.

6. Reframing the Problem

An important insight from systems thinking is that problems are often defined in ways that limit possible solutions.

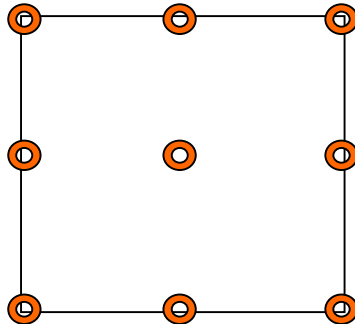
A classic example is the **nine-dot exercise**, where participants are asked to draw four straight connected lines through nine dots arranged in a square. Many people struggle because they unconsciously assume that the lines must stay within the boundaries of the square.

However, the solution requires extending the lines **beyond the assumed boundaries** of the problem.

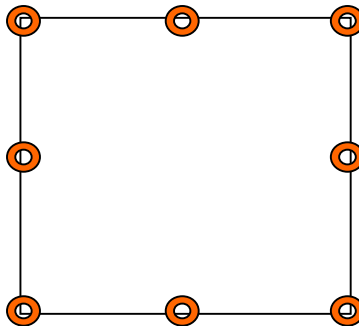
This illustrates an important lesson in change processes: the problem itself may not be the real difficulty. Instead, the challenge often lies in **how the problem is defined and understood**.

The Nine-dot Exercise (Ahrenfeldt / Watzlawick)

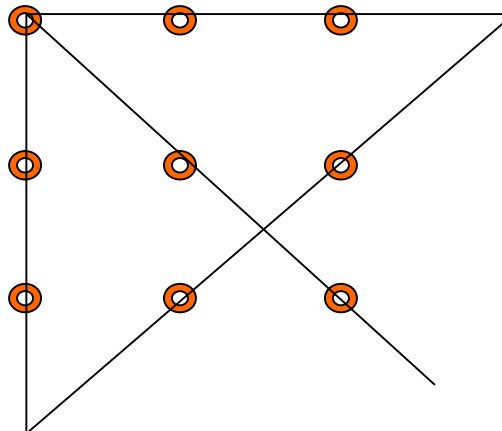
- Draw four straight connected lines through all nine points!



- If we decide to reduce the problem by removing one dot, it becomes easier



- The difficulty is not the dots themselves, but the invisible boundary we assume around them.



- In many organizational change processes, the difficulty is not the problem itself, but how the problem is defined.

Conclusion

Resistance is a natural and inevitable part of organizational change.

Rather than attempting to eliminate resistance, leaders can benefit from understanding what resistance reveals about the organization, the change process, and the people involved.

Resistance can provide valuable insights into concerns, uncertainties, and hidden assumptions within the system.

Ultimately, successful change does not depend only on plans and strategies, but on how leaders and organizations **understand and work with resistance**.

As systems thinkers have suggested:

The problem is not the problem.

How we deal with the problem is the real problem.

References

- Ahrenfelt, B. *Förändring som tillstånd*
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J., & Fisch, R. *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*
- Scott, C., & Jaffe, D. *Managing Organizational Change*